

WASHINGTON - Processing low-level radioactive waste from foreign countries would be banned under legislation introduced Wednesday by Democratic Rep. Bart Gordon and Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander.

The proposal is in response to a request in 2007 by EnergySolutions to process 20,000 tons of waste from Italy at its Bear Creek facility in Oak Ridge. The remaining material would be stored in Utah.

Gordon's primary concern is safety. "Every additional load that goes through somebody's community ... there could be a problem," he said.

Gordon cited the recent 1 billion-gallon spill of coal ash sludge in East Tennessee as an example of a rare occurrence that can have a devastating impact.

Jill Sigal, executive vice president of EnergySolutions, said the company transports material 8 million miles a year without incident. And it has processed and transported several hundred million pounds of waste generated in Tennessee to Utah, she said.

The company, she said, believes the decision should be left to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. "They are the technical and safety experts."

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., one of more than 30 co-sponsors of the House bill, acknowledged during the news conference announcing the measure that the perception of danger from the low-level material is greater than the reality.

"According to all the experts, we are dealing with materials that frankly people imagine are glowing but may have just been worn by a technician doing radiation treatments," Terry said. "But we're in politics; and perception is reality."

Sigal responded: "Is Congress in the business of creating public policy based on perception? It (Terry's statement) proves our position that there is no health or safety issue."

The low-level waste from decommissioned nuclear power plants includes gloves and other clothing worn by workers, as well as paper, metals and liquids.

EnergySolutions' request for a license for the Italian waste was put on hold by the NRC

pending resolution of a legal dispute between the company and Utah and other states that claim authority over the disposal site.

Besides the safety issue, Gordon and Alexander argue that having foreign low-level nuclear waste stored at the site in Clive, Utah, would leave less room for waste from U.S. nuclear plants.

More than 90 of the 104 nuclear power plants in the U.S. have access to only the Utah storage site, Gordon said.

“The United States shouldn't become the world's nuclear garbage dump and that's why I'm introducing a version of his bill in the Senate,” Alexander said in a written statement.

EnergySolutions, based in Salt Lake City, employs about 550 people in Tennessee and restricting foreign import of waste would prevent expansion of those operations, Sigal said.

